

A 478 a 40
S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF TOWCESTER,

AT THE

TRIENNIAL VISITATION

OF THE

RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD

S P E N C E R,

LORD BISHOP OF PETERBOROUGH,

On SATURDAY, JUNE 16, 1798.

BY

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IMPRIMATUR.

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Jul. 6, 1798.



2 TIM. ii. 15.

STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO
GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT
TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE
WORD OF TRUTH.

IT is an argument of the dignity and importance of the Christian Priesthood, that the Holy Spirit, by the hand of St. Paul, hath set forth the duties of its ministers in three distinct epistles. Timothy and Titus, the companions of this Apostle in preaching the gospel, instructed ordained and commissioned by him, were well acquainted, no doubt, with what belonged to their sacred office. Yet St. Paul, according to the wisdom given unto him, judged it necessary to inform them also by letter, and, through them, all succeeding pastors, how they ought to behave themselves in “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth^a.”

^a 1 Tim. iii. 15.

In the text he reminds one of these his beloved sons of the true scope and object of all ministerial labours; he directs him in the performance of a considerable branch of those labours; and he shews the consequence of discharging them faithfully. The object is the approbation of God; the business is to teach the word of truth rightly; the consequence is, that he who does this needeth not to be ashamed.

“ Study to shew thyself approved unto God.” It is with great propriety, that what is or ought to be the aim and desire of all Christians, to please God, is proposed as more peculiarly the object of Christian ministers. In the language of prophecy the stars or angels of provincial or national churches are in the hand of Christ^b; the chief pastors of such churches hold their authority immediately from Him, without any intervening vicegerent. In more familiar speech ministers in general are the ambassadors of Christ and

^b Rev. i. 16. 20. See Bishop Bagot's Discourses on the Prophecies, p. 251.

stewards of his household. It behoves every servant to be obedient to his master; but of stewards it is more especially required, that they be faithful to their lord, and please him well in all things. It is the duty of all subjects to honour and obey the king; but those who are delegated by him, who are about his person, and receive his commands, are doubly bound to shew affection, zeal, and fidelity in his service.

Of those who are thus chosen and brought near to serve Him who is “King of kings,” who “was dead and is alive for evermore^c,” the task demanded, even as it is here represented in part only, is great and momentous: they are to teach “the word of truth,” and to teach it “rightly.”—This “word of truth,” if we take St. Paul for his own interpreter, consists of two parts; which he inculcates in these epistles in passages almost innumerable, and couples them together by an almost endless variety of phrase: They are “charity and faith^d ;” “faith and a good

^c Rev. i. 18. xvii. 14.

^d 1 Tim. i. 5. ii. 15. 2 Tim. i. 13. ii. 22. iii. 10.

conscience^e;" "the mystery of faith in a pure conscience^f;" "the words of faith and of good doctrine^g;" "the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the doctrine which is according to godliness^h."

It is sometimes objected to us, that we are mere moral preachers, teaching nothing more than honesty and sobriety, without insisting on religious motives and faith in Christ. The objection, if true, is indeed a weighty one; as it is most certain, that morality, as well as prayer, which is without Christ, not performed by his aid, not presented through his merits, is of no avail; neither acceptable to God, nor profitable to man. But do not the objectors, those who are invidiously styled by their friends evangelical or gospel preachers, sometimes run into the opposite extreme? Do not they teach Christ, what they esteem to be Christ, some points which are true and some which are not true concerning him, without due attention to Christian obedience? The whole "counsel of God" must be de-

^e 1 Tim. i. 19.

^f Ibid. iii. 9.

^g Ibid. iv. 6.

^h Ibid. vi. 3.

clared ;

clared ; and that is “ repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ ⁱ.” Belief in the Divinity, death, and atonement of our blessed Redeemer is the ground of all ; but it is then only well pleasing in the sight of God, when it “ worketh by love ^k.” On the other hand, charity, we know, is “ the end of the commandment ^l,” and “ the bond of perfectness ^m ;” but it is then only charity, when it proceeds from “ a pure heart, and faith unfeigned :” and it is very observable, how large a portion even of these short pastoral letters is employed by St. Paul to recommend and enforce this excellent and favourite grace of charity, as it displays itself in all the domestic, and social, and civil duties ⁿ.

“ The word of truth” then, in these its essential and inseparable parts, must, as St. Paul tells us, be “ rightly divided.” It is needless to investigate the origin or precise

ⁱ Acts xx. 21. 27.

^k Gal. v. 6.

^l 1 Tim. i. 5.

^m Col. iii. 14.

ⁿ See 1 Tim. ii. 9, &c. v. vi. Tit. ii. iii.

meaning of the figure ; the general sense is sufficient for our purpose : the truth must be rightly taught ; which can only be done by lucid order, and true and solid arguments, derived sometimes from natural good sense, but much more frequently taken from the armoury and oracles of God. We must therefore be well grounded in the faith, versed in the habit and forms of sound reasoning and just interpretation ; ready and expert in the Scriptures, well acquainted with the proofs of their authenticity and of the truth of our holy religion ; and not ignorant of the errors and heresies, with which in various ages it has been deformed and corrupted. These learned topics it will not indeed often be necessary to bring forward ; but men of science will see, and the unlearned will feel, whether he who discourses on any subject exhausts his whole stock of knowledge ; or whether he speaks from the fulness of a mind richly stored with information, and represses much more than he delivers. More direct use also of the proofs of Christianity, and of its leading doctrines, may be requisite to satisfy
scruples,

scruples, or to solve objections, at a time when tracts of infidelity are industriously diffeminated; in an age highly curious and inquisitive, when, if erudition dwells in the schools, learning disdains not to visit the cottage.

But truths of such magnitude, which involve and connect the interests of both worlds, must be taught at all times, in season and out of season, by word and by example, at home and abroad. It is not meant, that, forgetful of our Lord's caution, we should cast "pearls before swine^o." Scriptural words and sacred subjects, rashly obtruded in common affairs, serve only to expose religion to ridicule, and her indiscreet friends to contempt. But if there is a well-spring of life in the heart, the dew of it will sometimes distil from the lips; and a word dropt unexpectedly, but seasonably, often makes a deep and lasting impression. We have examples in this case, which may command by their authority, and encourage by

^o Matth. vii. 6.

their

their success. When the hospitable *Zaccheus* received Christ as his guest, he found him a Saviour^p; and the Ethiopian statesman was converted by Philip on his journey^q.

Lastly and above all, the gospel of truth, which is the hope of all, should be preached to all, to every rank, and to every age. To the poor especially it was first addressed; and the poor at all times may easily understand it; for it is only the mercy of God towards us in Christ Jesus, commanding us, through the same blessed Jesus, to love Him, and to love one another. None can learn it too early; for none can be happy too early; and none, if they are sincere, can learn it too late. But the young are, on every account, in the Christian scheme, intitled to peculiar consideration. Our Lord himself, who died for all, pronounced that his kingdom consists of little children, and such as resemble little children. The first dawning and preparation of the gospel was announced, not as the conversion of the young by the wisdom of the

^p Luke xix.

^q Acts viii. 27, &c.

aged, but as “ the turning of the hearts of the fathers to the children ;” and perhaps what has been remarked of that auspicious æra, the Reformation of our Church, is true in every age, that the heavenly seed of God’s word has its best growth and increase in the ingenuous heart and unprejudiced simplicity of Youth.

Thus to labour then in the word and doctrine will, as the Apostle suggests, take away shame, both root and branch, the cause and effect. He who fears and honours God in his heart and his life, will not be alarmed with any other terror. He who truly loves his brethren, and seeks their prosperity, after Christ’s example and for his sake, will think no office mean, which is connected either with their welfare, or their comfort. “ If I your Lord and Master have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another’s feet :” That is the rule exemplified by the practice of One who was, and knew that he was, in

¹ Luke i. 17.

² John xiii. 14.

the space of a few hours to be apprehended and to die for those whom he washed, and for all mankind.

When the gospel was first published, the whole world opposed it. And hence it was, that our Lord so frequently and so earnestly warned his disciples, as They in their turn exhorted the brethren, not to be ashamed of the cross of Christ. In these days, big with events and prolific of wonders, it is our happy lot, through the mercy of God towards us, to hear only at a distance the sound of that storm, which desolates Europe; and, in its permitted course, threatens to bury truth itself amidst the ruins of error. But who can say what trials are reserved for us, if we do not repent and amend? if by our ingratitude, our distractions, and divisions, we provoke God's anger? if, in our lukewarmness and indifference, we abhor the light, and loathe the manna sent down from heaven to sustain us? An awful veil hangs over futurity; but who knows how soon it may be removed? Who can tell whether the predicted persecution and death of the witnesses of truth are not
fast

fast approaching' ? And who can assure us, that the tremendous visitation shall not begin at God's sanctuary ? " If thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation ". " If thou bearest the banner of the cross, arm thyself with courage ; fight manfully for thy God. Whether the Lord come at midnight, or in the morning, be found at thy post, vigilant and active.

But after all, in some desponding moments, a chilling reflexion steals across the breast, and now and then perhaps escapes from the lips : " I cannot perceive any good that I do." Be it remembered, that success is in no case the true standard of merit. Be it also remembered, that pure religion is retired and unobtrusive ; and never fully known, except by Him that seeth in secret. If one soul perishes through your neglect, fearful is the account which will be required at your hands. If one soul is saved by your care, unspeakable is the reward in heaven. If you do not often con-

* Rev. xi. 7, &c.

" Eccles. ii. 1.

vert obstinate finners, (an attempt however which should never be abandoned in despair,) you prevent vice, and strengthen infirmity. You preach the pure word of God, and administer his blessed sacraments; which are the life of thousands, who, to a common observer, are not easily distinguishable from many of their neighbours, that, without a vital principle of religion, maintain an outward decency of conduct from motives of fashion, of credit, or convenience.

The operation of religion is progressive. Seated early in the heart, it new-moulds and fashions by imperceptible degrees the whole man: it “grows with our growth, and strengthens with our strength;” and is more and more vigorous as the body decays. Parental advice and parental example, wholesome words heard in God’s worship or read in his book, serious reflexion, consolation in sickness, dangers escaped, devout prayer, edifying communion; a thousand things which we can remember, and ten thousand which we have forgotten, contributed to our improvement, each in their turn; and on the whole we walk in
 God’s

God's laws with far greater ease and greater alacrity ; we are more resigned to his will, and more charitable to our neighbour. " In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand * ;" it will spring and grow up thou knowest not how ; but after many days thou shalt surely find it, bearing fruit unto life eternal.

The adversaries of our order, the avowed enemies of religion, bear, in their own proceedings, strong testimony to the utility of our profession and the efficacy of our labours. Banded together, in their dark conclaves, by tests of impiety, they delegate missionaries of sedition, who preach treason against government and apostasy from Christ ; and are not deterred in their machinations of mischief, their career of iniquity, though they confess it may require many years, or even ages, to *regenerate* the world agreeably to their wishes. They have the inherent wickedness of the human heart, and the restless malignity of evil spirits, to forward their designs. *You*

* Ecclef. xi. 6.

carry a message, which is fraught with the peace, the order, the comfort of this world; and insures everlasting happiness in the next. The holy angels minister with you in the work of salvation; and God himself beholds, and blesses, and will reward your labours. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

THE END.